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Narrative as An/Other History or His/Story Otherwise

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Urvashi Butalia in tracing the silenced voices of partition victims looks for a methodology for retrieving their voice and finds it in James E. Young's account of the Holocaust.¹ She says that one could know this event called Partition from the ways 'it has been handed down to us'. It is through fiction, memoirs, testimonies, individual and collective memories that one could weave together the fragments of the moment called Partition which has only been the beginning of many other partitions – of land, of history, of people, of hearts and of selves. Like many other geo-political and cultural locales affected by Partition, a very unique site for such an inquiry is the geo-political locale called the Surma-Barak Valley which has witnessed the added burden of the Sylhet Referendum as a legitimized corollary of Partition. In the wake of the Partition Assam happily gave away one of its districts Sylhet to Pakistan. Mountbatten's partition-plan announced on 3 June 1947, provided inter-alia for a referendum to be held in the Sylhet district of Assam to decide whether it should remain a part of the Indian province of Assam or go to East Pakistan. The farcical Sylhet referendum was held on 6 July 1947 and the predictable result went in favour of a merger with Pakistan. While the umbilical chord of the vast chunk of the Hindu and Muslim population belonging to the four *thanas* that were retained from the Sylhet District by Assam remained connected to Sylhet, politically and

geographically they remained attached to the Cachar District of Assam i.e. Barak Valley. Therefore, Surma-Barak Valley becomes an appropriate description for a cultural intervention through literary narrative and fictional descriptions of the moment of Partition. Such an enterprise not only deconstructs a dominant historical moment but also recasts it, weaving different levels of silences.

Literary representations have always highlighted the difference between the *real* and *imaginary* that lies at the heart of the self by way of covering it up through a complex play between the symbolic and the experiential. The play has a double bind: of setting-to-work in memory and of temporally implicated arrival of an event. The play emerges as an experience preserving system of signification which can take a linguistic, semiotic and literary stance on the very notion of Being. This is how literary narratives essentially link real life form to art. Such narratives, if domain specific and therefore coherent, are likely to constitute a community that identifies itself with the narrative in terms of a remembered tradition, an event or a collective memory. Narratives derive their sustenance not because they essentially speak of something that is true or false but because they make their listeners feel a sense of shared meaning. Rather than being a simple case of the storyteller and the narrative in question, inventing and imposing metaphors of agreement, what perhaps actually guide and determine the character of the narrative to be told are the traces of lived experiences with all their knowable and unknowable elements. Ingrained within the narratives, the issue, one presumes, calls for a dialogue between a thinking self and a fixed notion of authentic community. Such dialogues are expected to bring to the fore all the implicit and explicit elements that account for the space between the narrative, its teller and the target audience. Such exercises basically centre on/in tracing the moments of presence and absence of the self, the world and others in an interlocution between the text and the context. It may eventually lead one to possibly end up finding a number of breaks and interruptions within what has so far looked like a coherent story. Consequently, the stable transmission of a fixed essence gives way to a live crisscrossing of signifiers over a dynamic and wide variety of narratives.

Narratives, by virtue of an excess over the comprehension of the tradition, often contain an element of ex-centricity, which implies that they are simultaneously culturally rooted and yet produce a counter-cultural domain. While it allows one to speak and not just say what one means, it promotes listening to the unheard, interprets the truth of the world and self in a way that is often unique. In a constant shift between being and becoming without a realized essence, a realm of the counterfactual therefore automatically goes into it signifying a series of contingent, invented and non-narratable ensemble of experiences. Narratives thus, provide for the necessary double bind of belonging to a unified story of life and yet not belonging to what the story merely says. It opens up a different space of living that looks for different cultures, communities other than one's own and engages one with stories/narratives of others. This is how narratives emerge as alter/native spaces of enquiry, privileging the representations of everyday life, thereby interrogating the authorial voice of History of an event like Partition. In tracing an alter/native space against dominant texts of history what is needed is a thoroughly discursively informed reading and writing practice that is attentive to the literariness of narrative and the undecidability of all texts.

In this context an examination of a short fiction called *Bindu Bindu Jal*² (which means drops of water) by Shekhar Das would provide for an alter/native reading of India's Partition, as experienced by the people under the conditions described above, who were forcibly pushed into refugee-hood causing violation to their material and moral self. The goal of this reading, therefore, is to provide an example of how a staged dialogue between literary and historiographical narratives puts pressure on totalizing constructions of the self, experience, and agency and their relation to the notion of citizenship in the modern nation-state. This is a painful narrative of how a community of people was violently (re)constituted as a monolithic site for the containment of contradictions in state and community nationalist imaginings. Recently, efforts to 'recover' marginal 'voices' and/or memories of the Partition have emphasized the value of including literary sources as 'evidence' in historiographical narratives. More often than not, however, the inclusion of these sources has been engineered to reinscribe humanist notions of literary production

as merely subjective, mimetic and universal in contrast to the objectivity and specificity associated with historical research. A narrative like *Bindu Bindu Jal* presents a graphic picture of a community in its moment of ontological loss which results into a total fragmentation of the being. Such a description represents people's individual lives as something separate from their cause, i.e. Partition. Dominant narratives of History have only recorded factual details of Partition leaving out the element of human agony leading to a loss and partition of the self. 'Personal experience,' in this context, is conceived of as universal, transparent and outside language, culture, and ironically, history.³ Stories of victims take the existence of individuals as real actors whose empirical experiences constitute the history of a people, prompting a 'willing suspension of disbelief.'⁴ So rather than asking how conceptions of selves (of subjects and identities) are produced one becomes a participant in the narrative which operates within an ideological construction that not only makes individuals the starting point of knowledge, but that also naturalizes categories such as *man* and *woman*, irrespective of their caste and religion, by treating them as given characteristics of individuals.

The text opens with a familiar symbol of a oil lamp under a basil plant where Surabala is pouring more oil than is necessary so that the lamp can remain lit for the next two days unless disturbed by the wind. The tension of Partition has been introduced by the impending instability of the oil lamp which is a marker of the instability that is to come in the life of the people of the household in particular and the community in general. Surabala and her three children are leaving their home – their ancestor's land – to escape from communal riots and killing. Surabala's husband had already left home to look for shelter and accommodation in the new land. As twelve-year-old Parul, Surabala's youngest daughter, already very angry that her father has left without telling her, watches her mother leave her huge bunch of keys under the basil plant praying to God to look after their home in their absence she wonders why her mother was doing so. Perhaps she was even more perplexed when her mother picked up the keys again saying to herself, 'Let me take back the keys. Maybe it will be possible to come back home again.' Unable to resist her curiosity Parul asks her mother, 'Where are we going maa?' Her mother says, 'India.'

Parul replies, confused, 'But maa, isn't this also India?' 'Yes,' says her mother. 'Everything is the same. Only the name has changed.' The ambivalence of belonging and un-belonging is the state of existence for the victims of Partition where the self becomes a product of the politics of naming. Self becomes the other in the politics of naming, citizens become refugees, one's own land becomes a foreign land just as the symbol of the oil lamp gets disfigured and extenuated into an image of the funeral pyre meant for Parul.

Shekhar Das gives a very poignant description of the journey of Surabala and her three children from home to an unknown and uncertain locale across the border in a bullock cart. Little Parul drops little rags, spoons and pieces of her bangles as the cart moves towards the border explaining that she would use them as landmarks to get back home whenever there was a chance. Little did she imagine that in a few hours she would be cremated in the most unceremonious manner on a river bank after being attacked by cholera. Her mother and brothers could not even provide her with a drop of drinking water amidst the unhygienic environment of the refugee camp. Little Parul, so full of life a little while ago, lies lifeless on the twigs to be lighted as her funeral pyre. As her mother Surabala bathes her for the last time on the river bank, dressing her in her white frock, this lifeless body of a twelve year old child becomes the blank page on which the violent history of Partition will be inscribed. The dominant narrative of history would have no space for this heartbreaking episode of the brutal exodus of people who have lost everything in the real sense of the term. Shekhar Das plays on this image of loss and nothingness through his title, *Bindu Bindu Jal* or drops of water, which represents the drops of silent tears shed by Surabala and many other victims as their little ones die in front of their eyes without even a drop of drinking water. The image of the still flame of the oil lamp under the basil plant at the beginning of the narrative extends to the funeral pyre of many Paruls while invisible flames of grief start blazing in many a mother's heart. The tension between text and context that impinges on fictional accounts of Partition demands that the reader theorize representations of experience taking into account the gap or shift between the text and its historical referent.⁵ These sufferings of displaced peoples

can be understood as examples of material reality putting pressure on the discursive domains of conservative-nationalism, communalism, and patriarchy. The death of minor children like Parul in refugee camps and the impossibility of postal communication, as in the case of Parul's brother writing a letter to his father Nalini in an imaginary address, to convey the tragedy of his sister's death, present new social and moral issues concerning civic rights in the aftermath of Independence which had its implications in the nationalist imaginings of the recently-formed postcolonial state. In short, the 'everyday' perspective or experience represented in literary narrativizations of these events should be read as a diffraction of historical moments where nations, communities, families, and individuals engage in a discursive struggle over the interpretation of material reality and the identities of 'nowhere people'.⁶

Running parallel with the narrative of Surabala's family are other narratives of people of a small village consisting of twenty houses. The people of this village could not cast their votes on the day of the referendum. On the one hand it was raining heavily on the day of voting and on the other hand it was all managed by false voters. The tension started after midnight when grandchildren had already fallen asleep after story-telling sessions of their grandmothers, farmers had just fallen into slumber least expecting the horror that was waiting although one knew that things were not going right in those days of referendum. The majority of the people of this village are basically peaceful in nature and if there was an attack from the majority group of violators, they could only play defensively. So when the sounds of commotion drew near, the villagers all old and young ran for life seeking shelter and cover behind the bamboo bushes which the jackals had just deserted as if in fear of the violent drama of bloodbath caused by human beings. The most vulnerable were the old who could not run fast and those women with young children in their laps. Violence was unleashed all around. The attackers came with pointed spears and daggers beheading husbands in front of their wives and mutilating the genital organs of both males and females.

The most tragic of all is the story of Basumati and her

husband Dwijen who realize that in their desperate run for life Basumati had picked up her three year old son Ratul's side pillow instead of the sleeping child. As they look to run back to the village to pick him up they see the whole village ablaze. Basumati turns completely insane after days of waiting for her husband to return with her son. Even birds seem to shudder at the condition of Basumati, now completely out of her mind and without any sensation of pain or shame which categorize one as being human. She sleeps under trees and runs around throwing stones unable to even remember her name when officials in the relief camp ask her. Shekhar Das in his narrative of brutal violence and its inscription on the human body, particularly the female (as shown in the case of little Parul and now Basumati), constantly harps on the borderline of the human and the animal. As human beings are reduced to animalism in their mad instinct for violence animals are depicted as possessing the so-called human values. Like the jackals who had run away from the bamboo bushes on seeing the mad killing of man by man, now birds seem to spread their wings and cover the almost naked body of Basumati who even in her insanity cannot escape sexual violence on her body. The irony of the situation is heightened by the fact that another child orphaned by the violence has got attached to Basumati who is not in a state even to be conscious of her own self. Yet she is the proxy mother to this boy who might have lost his own mother in the exodus just as Basumati has lost her son Ratul and whose name she still remembers.

Madness as destruction of human sanity has been understood by many as an inseparable aspect of a collective madness accompanying the violence during and after Partition.⁷ Sadaat Hasan Manto in his short story *Khuda Ki Kasam* (I Swear by God) written in the backdrop of Partition depicts a mad mother wandering from city to city in North India, mumbling incoherently, half naked and hair matted just like Basumati refusing to believe that her child is dead. This is how the Partition has resulted in a 'partition of selves' by partitioning families and communities.⁸ Under such as partitioning of the self and the border crossing of human and animal values one wonders as to what would be the epistemic status of Reason or rationality of what was

'right' and what was 'wrong', what 'moral' and 'immoral', what 'sane' and what 'insane'. Partition narratives of this kind perhaps destabilize the conventional claim to the ontology of the self and knowledge claims.

One's claim to narrative as an/other history stems from such destabilization of dominant knowledge systems such as History and the grand narratives of epistemology in its attempt to grasp and represent the element of pain and human suffering that are involved in Partition and Holocaust. Narratives of the fictional kind such as *Bindu Bindu Jal* capture these moments of human pain and suffering without laying truth claims like History.⁹ In this context it may be pertinent to recall De Man's argument on literary narratives,¹⁰ that '[w]henver this autonomous potential of language can be revealed by analysis, we are dealing with literariness and, in fact with literature as the place where this negative knowledge about the reliability of linguistic utterance is made available.' Again 'Literature,' de Man writes, 'is fiction not because it somehow refuses to acknowledge 'reality', but because it is not *a priori* certain that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are like those, of the phenomenal world. . . . This does not mean that fictional narratives are not part of the world and of reality; their impact upon the world may well be all too strong for comfort. What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenism.' For more than a decade now critical study is being encouraged in claiming an/other history through narrative by critiquing the 'assumed differences between 'literary' versus 'historical' narratives and the assumed 'value' that each 'type' of text comes to represent for the historiographer reconstructing the events of a particular historical moment.'¹¹ Such a critique of the subjectivity associated with a literary narrative and the objectivity associated with History pronounces the subjects at the receiving end of such an enterprise. These subjects are the victims, the real authors as witness to such an event as Partition and one's claim to an/other history is to give history back to its real authors to whom it actually belongs but who have been turned into the *other* of dominant History.

In such a context the figure of 'Basumati' as the real witness

of the violent history of Partition, now turned as its other because of her insanity represents the 'unrepresentable' both in the sense of an impossibility of 'being' as well as of a distorted and victimized affect of not having the 'being'. 'Having' assumes a settled history and an autonomous determination of oneself, which remains 'suspended' as an affect of a history of violence. The 'violated' being of Basumati acts as a signifier of victimhood. The question is, can the violated signifier signify its usual historical, objective and cultural reference, or does it just enact the impossibility of representation of its originary suffering of violence? Shekhar Das almost but not completely ventures into a zone of impossibility between signifying and suspension without a passage from reality to history. He poses the signifier 'Basumati' as the sign of being the violated 'mother earth'. The artistic alteration between Basumati as a violated personhood and Basumati as the mother earth is the phenomenology of silence that seeks a new addressee, the institution of nation-state that must listen through Basumati's deaf-mute silence. The situation of Basumati in Sekhar Das's *exposé* can be read along Lyotard,

(...) [S]omething "asks" to be put into phrases [Basumati], and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away. This is when the human beings who thought they could use language as an instrument of communication learn through the feeling of pain which accompanies silence (...) that they are summoned by language (...) to recognize that what remains to be phrased exceeds what they can precisely phrase, and that they must be allowed to institute idioms which do not yet exist.¹²

Basumati as an idiom of partitioned selves, assumes the role of singular-plural that institutes a new addressee of nation-state to which it seeks to belong by annulling the partition that it had suffered from. The 'truth' disclosed in this annulment is a 'structure of feeling' that stands as 'evidence' for the 'agency' of the violated.¹³ Such an 'evidence' stands over and against the field of a universalizable norm of 'legitimacy' in the conceptual dichotomy of being a person and being an 'other' within the differentiated nation-space constituted by a 'civil society' as an end-in-itself.¹⁴ As argued by philosophers, a rationally coherent 'civil society' as an end-in-itself does not necessarily give a 'face' to its own dialectic,

it rather remains as an absence in terms of a relationship within the 'civic' modern society.¹⁵ The most significant ontological-historical question that such a new addressee in the form of a nation-state has to face is, can there be a 'guiltless' relationship with the Other? Or rather, how the guilt would hang before and after every relationship with the Other is the proper substance of a history of violence that looks for 'moral elbow room' in the legislation of the 'self' that is independent of any objectively real feature of the 'violated'.¹⁶ Shekar Das looks for this 'moral elbow room' by altering the violated Basumati into *Basumati* proper with a causal-historical narrative only to be subsumed under an autonomy of self-legislation by partitioned selves. There is, then, a moment of recovery from the impossible 'object' of violence and violation that marks a transition from Basumati, the violated, into Basumati, the mother earth, only to alter and subject the latter in the autonomy of the former (which is independent of the 'object' of violence and history). The situation is better stated in separating the experiential and the 'formation of subjectivity' in a space of the recoverable, the extended notion of the possibility of relationship with a new addressee *that happens only in a new metonymic space*, which is not a space of nostalgia and fantasy – rather it is a space of multiple subjectivities that compose it by a play between the real and the imagined. The meaning of this space can be understood in the following,

(...) all differential identity will be constitutively split; it will be the crossing point of the logic of difference and the logic of equivalence.¹⁷

The constitutive split in *Basumati* between speaking and silence, between past and present is an 'unrepresentable' that poses the Lyotardian differend between Basumati's self and Basumati proper that keep crossing each other in the play between the logic of identity and the logic of difference as a co-occurring history in the metonymic space of the face, body, civil society and the nation-state.

NOTES & REFERENCES

1. Urvashi Butalia: *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*. 2000, p. 7.

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2. Shekhar Das, *Bindu Bindu Jal*, Amritlok Sahitya Parishad, Kolkata. 2004. As a reader one finds traces and identifies the source of this narrative in the experiences of people of the Surma-Barak Valley who were victimized and displaced due to the (manipulated) verdict of the Sylhet Referendum. However this narrative is not to be read exclusively as the experiences of the people of the Surma-Barak Valley.
3. See Ian Talbot, "Literature and the Human Drama of the 1947 Partition", *South Asia* 18 (1995): 37-56.
4. This is a concept borrowed from S.T. Coleridge meaning a compulsion of a narrative moment that forces the listener to believe in the narrative truth.
5. See Joan W. Scott's "The Evidence of Experience." *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991).
6. This term is being used as a metaphor by contemporary critics to designate displaced people particularly those rendered homeless after Partition.
7. See Stephen Alter, "Madness and Partition: The Short Stories of Sadaat Hasan Manto", *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, No. 14, Madness and Civilization, (1994), pp. 91-100.
8. See Vinay Lal, "Partitioned Selves, Partitioned Pasts: A Commentary on Ashis Nandy's Death of an Empire" in Vinay Lal (ed.) *Dissenting Knowledges, Open Futures: The Multiple Selves and Strange Destinations of Ashis Nandy*, Delhi: Oxford, 2000.
9. See Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*, Vol 3. Trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago, University of Chicago Press. 1988.
10. See Paul de Man's *The Resistanc. to Theory*, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota 1986, as quoted by Jill Didur in "Fragments of Imagination: Re-thinking the Literary in Historiography through Narratives of India's Partition." in *Jouvert*: Vol. I, Issue 2. 1997.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele, Univ. of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1980, p. 13.
13. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Moving Devi-1997: The Non-Resident and the Expatriate," *Other Asias*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 2008, p.191.
14. Goutam Biswas, "Autonomy of Reason and Ethics of the Face: Imagining a Civil Society in Kantian Lineage" in Bindu Puri and Heiko Sievers (eds.), *Reason, Morality and Beauty: Essays on the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2007, pp. 34-5
15. Goutam Biswas formulates this following Levinas. *Ibid.*, p. 36-7.
16. Bijoy H. Boruah, "Autonomy and the Virtue of Self-Legislation" in Bindu Puri, *op.cit.*, pp.118-33.
17. Ernest Laclau, *Emancipations*, Verso, London, 1996, p.53.